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***published in***

Journalism Studies  
2012

***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1080/1461670X.2012.662398](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.662398)

***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

***citation for published version (APA)***

Costera-Meijer, I. C. (2012). When News Hurts. The promise of participatory storytelling for urban problem neighbourhoods. *Journalism Studies*, 14(1), 13-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.662398>

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On: 26 March 2012, At: 12:53

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journalism Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjos20>

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Available online: 09 Mar 2012

To cite this article: Irene Costera Meijer (2012): WHEN NEWS HURTS, Journalism Studies, DOI:10.1080/1461670X.2012.662398

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.662398>



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# WHEN NEWS HURTS

## The promise of participatory storytelling for urban problem neighbourhoods

Irene Costera Meijer

*A content analysis of more than 3400 news items published in national and regional Dutch (quality) newspapers, in combination with ethnographic audience and production research, has allowed us to explain when, how and why news can hurt. A longitudinal ethnographic case study of two highly mediatized urban areas shows how residents claim to lose touch with everyday reality as a result of continuous one-dimensional and sensationalized news coverage of their neighbourhood. This case study also illuminates how participatory media enable residents to negotiate, make sense of and give meaning to alternative, more "realistic" readings of everyday life. Finally, the research suggests how professional journalistic routines might have to change in order to prevent news from being unnecessarily painful: from citizen participation to citizen facilitation, from an accent on negative news and a critical tone of voice to doing justice to the multilayered reality of neighbourhoods, from a focus on extraordinary events to explaining everyday occurrences.*

**KEYWORDS** audience studies; content analysis; ethnography; hyper local journalism; journalistic routines; participatory media

### Introduction

I first realized how news could be upsetting when in the early 1990s our university gradually closed down its Women's Studies department. It was quite painful to discover that journalists took recourse to all possible clichés about women's studies to describe our department's demise. In this respect there was no difference between the journalists who worked for Dutch quality media and those employed by the university's weekly newspaper. No matter how hard we tried to tell our story in a balanced and accurate way, each time it proved a waste of energy; the story was already in the journalists' minds and our statements were merely useful in as far as they could serve as illustration.

Twenty years later I'm on a panel discussion with the editor in chief of the Dutch Public Newscaster, Hans Laroes. In front of us, behind us and next to us dozens of angry Muslim youngsters, criticizing the representation of Islam in Dutch news media (Amsterdam, 17 February 2011). They give ample evidence of the various ways media repeatedly provide a distorted, incomplete, one-sided, outsider view of Islam. They feel hurt, all those present claim, because news about Islam deeply affects their everyday lives; invariably, items about Islam are automatically connected to news about terrorism, drug trafficking, rioting and crime.

These two anecdotes are meant to draw attention to the concern that some people—the poor, women, youngsters, and ethnic, religious or sexual minorities—are hurt more by the news than others (Bullock et al., 2001; Dreher, 2009). Mainstream Western

*Journalism Studies*, 2012, *iFirst Article*, 1–16

ISSN 1461-670X print/1469-9699 online

© 2012 Taylor & Francis <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.662398>

news media have a tendency to distribute their efforts, empathy or compassion unequally in their coverage of news issues (Van Ginneken, 1996). Couldry (2001, 2006) speaks of the “hidden injuries of media power”. Increasingly, public communication in modern societies depends upon media-based technologies and performances. Consequently, people make sense of themselves, the world and each other in and through media (Coleman and Ross, 2010; Costera Meijer, 2010). Silverstone’s (2007, p. 5) concept of Mediapolis helps to understand why and how news hurts, because it recognizes media as “environmental”, “as tightly and dialectically intertwined with the everyday. We have become dependent on the media for the conduct of everyday life.”

Grounded in empirical text analysis and ethnographic research, this paper discusses whether and how participatory storytelling may ease the pain caused by mainstream news. We derived the notion of participatory storytelling from Joyce Nip (2006), who described it as involving projects in which citizens are invited to tell their own news stories in a professional media context. The argument here will focus on one longitudinal case-study: a real-life television experiment called *U in de Wijk* (*You in the Neighbourhood*)<sup>1</sup> consisting of two hyper-local participatory storytelling projects in multi-ethnic, urban “problem areas”, initiated to counteract the negative impact of overexposure to tendentious journalism and supported professionally by a regional public broadcaster.

### The Promise of Participatory Storytelling

After initial enthusiasm (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2005; Gillmor, 2004; Jenkins and Thorburn, 2004), many scholars lowered their expectations of participatory journalism. In their recent book on participatory journalism, Singer et al. (2011) acknowledge that citizen-journalists may still serve as a counterweight to mainstream reporting, and citizen media keep on promising to offer the voice and perspective of ordinary people more presence in the public sphere. Yet they suggest that in everyday journalism organizations “users are being kept outside of the news process itself. They are still, overall, receivers of information created and controlled by the journalist” (Singer et al., 2011, p. 189). Investigating Dutch participatory journalism projects, we signalled that the term “participatory” in combination with “journalism” is often problematic for professional journalists (Costera Meijer et al., 2009). They prefer citizens to act as users generating content for them rather than as active producers collaborating with them (Williams et al., 2011).

Working from a communication studies perspective, but using a similar optimistic and enthusiastic tone as the founding fathers of participatory journalism, Sandra Ball-Rokeach et al. (2001) presented “Storytelling Neighbourhood” as an empowering media practice for residents of problem areas. They defined it as “the communication process through which neighborhood discussion transforms people from occupants of a house to members of a neighborhood” (2001, p. 392). Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006a, 2006b) employed *storytelling neighbourhood* as a verb to emphasize the active construction of neighbourhoods by the involvement of residents, community organizations and local media in creating belonging in immigrant communities. Sharing the stories among a wider audience would foster individual empowerment and stimulate community participation. The empowering potential of digital storytelling as part of a community-building strategy was also recognized by Lambert (2006 [2002]), the Council of Europe (Lewis, 2008) and

Bromley (2010), particularly for those alienated or otherwise excluded from access to media. On his website, project leader Daniel Meadows (2003), described the digital storytelling project *Capture Wales* at BBC Wales as “remarkably empowering and, when imagined as a tool of democratized media, it has I think the potential to change the way we engage in our communities.” Couldry (2008, pp. 383–4) mentioned the possibility that “digital storytelling is part of a wider democratization, a reshaping of the hierarchies of voice and agency.”

In their analysis of scholarship on community and news media, Lowrey et al. also concluded that the majority of the studies assume community media “should help create a shared understanding of what it means to be a member of a community—what the community’s values are, what is normal, and what is considered ‘out of bounds’” (2008, p. 284).

Other scholars, however, have expressed doubts about the assumed emancipatory nature of participatory media initiatives. O’Donnell (2009) contends that one needs to have quite some knowledge and technology to actually let one’s voice be heard in the current media landscape, after which it is still questionable whether one’s story will also be noticed in this cacophony. Access to interactive technology alone does not automatically guarantee that people are also heard, which would be true in particular for groups whose perspective tends to be covered only rarely. In this respect, the numbers of visitors of online news media are still lagging those of the users of offline news media, television in particular (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010).

Another qualification of the impact of participatory projects pertains to the distinction between “voice” and “understanding”. Participatory media promise that everyone gets the possibility to tell their own story. But having a voice does not automatically imply being heard, let alone being understood. For Husband (2009), a multi-ethnic public sphere requires not just the privileges of speaking, but also the obligations and responsibilities of seeking understanding. In this respect, John Downing (2008) concluded that constructive cultural changes are possible only when people consider it their duty to listen to others, notably those who are not usually counted among their partners in dialogue. O’Donnell et al. underlined the importance of making room for listening as a starting-point of communication:

Much of the analysis of mediated communication is modelled on a politics of expression, that is, of speaking up and out, finding a voice, making oneself heard, and so on . . . In our view, attention to the politics of listening provides a means of moving beyond questions of speaking and voice to canvass issues of dialogue and meaningful interaction across difference and inequality. (2009, p. 423)

Whether a story will resonate is also determined, according to Dreher (2009), by the status of the medium. When people are allowed to speak through “mainstream” media compared to getting a voice in media marked as “community”, “ethnic” or “alternative”, the potential size of the audience is much larger.

In this study we prefer to use the notion of “participatory storytelling”—rather than “participatory journalism”, “storytelling neighbourhood” or “community media”—for four reasons. First to avoid an automatic emphasis on promoting social integration and community consensus as primary goals of community media. Considering the nature of the neighbourhoods’ problematic, we had reason to believe that “social cohesion” might not be what residents had in mind as a primary goal of neighbourhood television. Second,

participatory storytelling describes more accurately the investigated subject: neighbourhood television by citizens facilitated by professionals. In line with Meadows et al. (2009), it does not define itself in opposition to mainstream media, but in terms of potential transformative processes it brings about within their participants. Third, using the notion "journalism" would automatically put forward questions of genre and format. Although these issues are important for the scholarship on journalism, it might too easily narrow down the investigation of neighbourhood TV to the question of whether its output has "quality" or could be labelled "journalism". Finally, we wanted to keep an open mind on what neighbourhood television is offering and on what residents themselves want out of it.

### Mediating the Neighbourhood

Most big cities, and the Dutch ones are no exception, contain areas that are systematically depicted by mainstream media as "problem neighbourhoods", an official policy term related to serious problems around housing, work, education, integration, health and safety. At the time of our research, two post-war multicultural urban neighbourhoods in the city of Utrecht, known as Kanaleneiland (15,693 inhabitants) and Overvecht (31,422 inhabitants), were even portrayed as no-go areas. Over the past decades their residential make-up had changed strongly, moving from being new and leafy suburbs in the 1960s mainly attracting first-time middle-class buyers and renters to so-called danger zones, with "Moroccan" vandals, thieves and drug traffickers staged as leading characters (Permentier et al., 2011; Wijkenmonitor, 2009). By 2009, over 75 per cent of the residents of Kanaleneiland had a non-Dutch cultural background. The largest group has roots in Morocco (40.2 per cent), while also Turks are well-represented (18.4 per cent). In Overvecht, residents of Dutch descent still form 47.8 per cent of the population, followed by residents of Moroccan descent (21.3 per cent).

News is experienced by residents of both neighbourhoods as something "the media" do to the people (cf. Lievrouw, 2009, p. 313). The paper uses a more dynamic concept of mediation informed by Roger Silverstone (2007), to enable an empirical exploration of the particular mediation processes involved in the representation of these two urban areas. For Silverstone (2007), those who engage with the media, however minimally such as switching on the TV set, somehow decide to do so. This activity can be viewed as participation and therefore, as Silverstone emphasizes, such activity, such agency implies some kind of responsibility. Participants in media culture must be understood to be taking responsibility for their own participation in it. In addition, the work of mediation does not stop with the appearance of the world on the screen. He notes that it crucially and definitively depends on the work of the participant:

minimally perhaps in the consistencies and inconsistencies of programme choice; and maximally in the capacity directly to produce media content in one form or another, as well as in the social or political responses to what has been seen or heard—that is through participant talk and action which engages directly not merely with the mediated images but with the world that those mediated images have sought to represent. (Silverstone, 2007, p. 108)

The research reported here addresses a participatory project involving hyper-local (news) stories made by two independent editorial groups of six to eight volunteers, calling

themselves “neighbourhood journalists” of varying cultural background and age and supported by three media professionals: a coordinating documentary maker and two cameramen/video-editors. As of September 2009, after three months of training of one day per week, each editorial group became responsible for a weekly TV programme of 10–15 minutes, broadcast by the regional public newscaster of Utrecht. The province of Utrecht is the most central one of the Netherlands, which in 2011 had 1,234,741 residents. Its capital, also named Utrecht, is the fourth city of the Netherlands with over 300,000 residents, 25 per cent of whom watch this station regularly. In addition, the digital stories were made available on the programme’s own website (<http://www.uindewijk.nl/>).

The research took place between July 2009 and May 2011. First, to establish the nature of mainstream news reporting, databank Lexis Nexis was used to automatically select all newspaper items that appeared in six national papers and one regional paper between 1 January 2007 and 8 January 2009 and which mentioned “Kanaleneiland” and/or “Overvecht”. This analysis resulted in a total of 3443 news items. Next, a protocol was constructed. Included in this protocol were paper, date, year/page section, length of article, article format (report, letter to the editor, commentary, etc.), positive or negative vein, subject matter, use of problem frame, presence of journalist on location, use of sources, nature and seriousness of the issues (items about robberies were encoded as more serious than items about shortage of parking space), and coherence of news reporting (links to other news items or events).<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, service items, letters to the editor, duplications, one-sentence announcements and news items that contained less than 100 words were excluded. Finally, this selection resulted in 713 longer reports that dealt explicitly with neighbourhood events: 475 about Kanaleneiland and a representative sample of 238 news items about Overvecht (and a control sample of 67 articles about a third, non-problematic neighbourhood in Utrecht, called Wittevrouwen). Selected news items were coded by hand by at least two (assistant) researchers.

In our next study we used a semi-standard, open-ended interview technique as described by Herman-Kinney and Verschaeve (2003). This technique involves asking interviewees a list of predetermined questions, but it permits the interviewer to solicit additional information from interviewees who are particularly responsive. The majority of the participants were recruited by addressing them on the street or by simply knocking on their doors. A minority was brought to our attention by community organizations. Most interviews took place in people’s homes, generally lasting one to two hours, were taped and later transcribed. Interview questions were organized into five sections: demographics; residents’ experiences of their neighbourhood and the mainstream reporting on it; the kind of stories they would like to tell/hear/watch about their neighbourhood; their wishes regarding neighbourhood TV; and finally, residents’ experience and appreciation of neighbourhood TV. Extensive quotations will be used, because most papers tell stories about residents, yet their actual voices often remain in the background.

Fifty-five interviews were conducted over a period of 12 months with residents of various ages (20 under the age of 40) and cultural backgrounds (19 of them had a non-Dutch background). In addition, the 14 professionals involved and the seven neighbourhood journalists were followed when at work (participant observation) and extensively interviewed, five of them several times in the course of the participatory project. Finally, the ongoing results of the research were communicated three times in an interactive setting with the neighbourhood journalists and their coaches, as part of the production research.

Taken together, our content analysis, audience analysis and production study created the possibility of triangulation, which increased the credibility and validity of the results. The paper's argument will focus on the results of the content analysis and the reception analysis.

### **The Representation of Kanaleneiland and Overvecht: A Content Analysis of Mainstream News About Two "Problem Neighbourhoods"**

In the period prior to the interviews both Kanaleneiland and Overvecht suffered from extremely high, almost identical, tendentious media coverage. National and regional papers produced more than 100 stories per month. In comparison, the adjacent neighbourhood received on average five stories per month. In 78 per cent of the 1473 news items about Kanaleneiland and in 59 per cent of the 1970 news items about Overvecht the "problem neighbourhood" news frame prevailed, closely resembling Altheide's (1997, p. 655) definition of problem frame: something existed that was undesirable (a lack of safety, crime, bad housing conditions, decay); many people were affected by this problem (the whole neighbourhood); unambiguous aspects or parts were easily identified (street pollution, nuisance and crime by young (Muslim) men); it could be changed or "fixed" (curfew, renovation of bad houses); there was a mechanism or procedure for fixing the problem (more policing, social integration of newcomers, development of new housing estates); the change or repair agent and process was known (government, housing corporation, police).

Remarkably, in spite of being located close to these areas, the regional press hardly differed in their coverage from their national (quality) counterparts (cf. Franklin, 2006). In particular, the relative lack of attention for the angle and experience of neighbourhood residents was noticeable, even more because the subject matter has a large influence on the life of residents. National newspapers quoted residents in 23 per cent of their larger reports on Kanaleneiland and 35 per cent of their reports on Overvecht. The regional newspaper quoted residents in only 26 per cent of its larger reports on Kanaleneiland and in 24 per cent of its reports on Overvecht. Unexpectedly, 55 per cent of all news items about a nearby elite neighbourhood (Wittevrouwen) used a resident as source. Equally surprisingly, considering the subject matter, our content analysis revealed that once residents were given a voice, the tenor of the press coverage was significantly more positive [for Kanaleneiland ( $F(2, 408) = 20.08, p < 0.01$ ) and Overvecht ( $F(4, 238) = 11.19, p < 0.05$ )]. This does not mean, however, that residents were singularly cheerful. By being attentive to different perspectives, the report conveyed a more complex story.

### **How and Why News Hurts: Losing Touch with Reality**

The dominant cultural narrative of decay and crime communicated through national and regional media served as an influential backdrop against which local narratives and personal stories were told (cf. Rappaport, 1995). Our 55 in-depth interviews with residents from various age groups, cultural backgrounds and histories all claimed to be bothered by the constant flow of (extremely) negative reports about their neighbourhood. "It affects you", Hafida (age 25, Dutch-Moroccan) said, later adding:



I don't mind it that much, but, well, in fact I do. Simply how they talk about your neighbourhood, where you live. It makes me think like, hey, what's going on here?

Most residents expressed their anger about how reporters systematically reiterated clichés about their immediate environment, if not exaggerating them. As Timon de Jager (57) from Overvecht told us:

When something gets into the press, it is always because of a problem in some place; it is covered widely right away, and this makes it seem as if the neighbourhood represents nothing beyond that one big problem.

According to the residents, the particular media logic of "the problem neighbourhood frame" leads to social isolation and stigmatization. Contrary to Permentier et al. (2011) who expected non-residents to base their opinion on objective neighbourhood characteristics rather than personal evaluations, our interviews illustrated the particular impact of news media on these two neighbourhoods. As Hafida (25) put it, "they fear being attacked or that something will happen to them or so." Whereas friends and relatives from elsewhere no longer dare to come and visit, a nearby district (Lombok), with similar "problem neighbourhood" statistics, is a popular residential area. Pamela de Vries (24, Dutch) explains she had to justify her decision to move to Kanaleneiland, her mother warning her it was "so dangerous". Once she was living there, she herself got stigmatized: "When I say I live in Kanaleneiland they pin you down and think, oh, you are one of those." The neighbourhoods' bad reputation even left their mark on people working there; 54-year-old postal deliveryman Arnout Kamerlink remembered how he was in mortal fear of riding his bicycle in Kanaleneiland because of "stories that the neighbourhood was notorious":

Whenever I passed through here, I would hurry on my bike, for I believed I was risking my life. Really, it is true. I would feel terrified whenever I rode my bike in this neighbourhood.

Oddly enough he has never felt unsafe since being a resident. Other residents worried that their own positive neighbourhood image would change by all the negative news stories. Mauro Trovato (35):

When I am here my sense is that I am living in a safe neighbourhood where little is wrong. But if on TV they expose you to an overkill [of negative stories], this image may start to shift without you realizing it, while in fact there ... [are no grounds for it].

News hurts, because its imagery gives the impression that the neighbourhood is full of aggressive mobs and that its degradation is a fact; sensible people had better avoid such neighbourhoods. Monique Copier (66) described how the media actively distort the neighbourhood's image:

When a ban on hanging around in groups was introduced, which I and everyone else in the neighbourhood highly welcomed, ... we had TV crews walk around here all the time. There were newspaper photos and TV items. On Friday morning they would come to the mall, showing the image of huge piles of garbage, so that all viewers would think: what a mess in Kanaleneiland! But they came in just 15 minutes before the garbage was due to be collected. It is highly distorting what they show.

Residents strongly suggest that mediatization in itself should be held accountable for adding to the problems by giving shape to particular stereotypes and expectations of

each other and their neighbourhood. The mediated realities function as an impediment for interpersonal communication. Moroccan-Dutch Nashida Akram (35):

Look, Dutch people, simply because they hear so many things, have a very negative image of us, you see? They are also afraid, say, to come in here.

Overvecht resident Thomas van Tocht (38) became so infuriated that he indicated how media did not just increase the neighbourhood's problems, but even caused them:

They no longer practise reporting only; they really co-determine the things that eventually happen here.

Reshma Dewkalie (29), one of the citizen-journalists participating in the project, explained how at one point, when journalists would enter the neighbourhood, the anger it set off turned itself into an occasion for news.

Boys had thrown stones, and they just stood there and received all that attention. And he [the reporter] just asked like: "Why do you do that?" When I am asked "Why do you do that?", I also become unruly. I also start saying: "Why are you filming me?" This is not news. This is provoking reactions!

Residents found it increasingly hard to distinguish televised and printed reality from face-to-face reality, especially the ones who had moved in recently. Most residents blamed the news media for them losing touch with reality. One 54-year-old woman, working and living in Overvecht, explained how her husband had to help out every day, because she was too afraid to open her own garage doors after dark. Not until he died, she discovered when walking her dog, that her feeling of being unsafe was based on misinformation, "on ignorance and the stories by the media and stories by other residents." Making this clear to other people motivated her to join the neighbourhood television team.

### Participatory Storytelling as a Media Intervention Strategy

In order to discuss how "ordinary people" could be represented differently, from bystanders to primary definers, Kunelius and Renvall distinguished four dimensions of validity: cognitive, normative, expressive and aesthetic (2010, pp. 517–9). First, mainstream journalism is usually based on the claim that the stories transfer cognitively valid information, which then also makes them valid normatively. In the case of neighbourhood television, the stories' normative validity should be grounded on transmitting citizens' first-hand experience. The claim for cognitive validity should be based on the expressive validity, honesty, of the citizens' stories. The normative claim could depend also on the aesthetic validity of the stories; on their ability to make the problem "felt". At the level of stories told by the residents themselves, the expressive force of stories (mainly arising from the combination of expressive and aesthetic validity) should challenge the dominant cultural narrative about the residents and the neighbourhoods.

Earlier it proved a pitfall of participatory journalism that professionals applied conventional standards to citizen-journalists (Costera Meijer et al., 2009; Singer, 2010). This is why the regional broadcaster airing the weekly programmes and hosting the citizen-journalists appointed a photographer annex documentary maker instead of a conventional journalist as coach and coordinator. She stimulated the neighbourhood journalists to make use of unconventional storytelling formats and themes. Together with two

professional video-editors/cameramen she sought to enable them as much as possible to tell their own stories. *U in de Wijk* was expected to intervene in a dominant cultural narrative. Still, professionals kept on relying on particular conventional approaches and routines. As one citizen-journalist criticized the coordinator: "she is the kind of person who tells me not to talk to people beforehand because 'then you used up all your ammunition!'" Like Meadows et al. (2009), our research revealed a passionate, intimate association between audiences and neighbourhood journalists.

But I still want to do it, in order to create a relationship of confidence ... I need that. I want to know where people stand. What they want from me, what I want from them, what I want to tell them. Otherwise there is no trust.

Creating trust as part of a strategy of "listening" by violating the "producer–audience boundary" seemed to work out well, in professional as well as in community terms. The residents who ended up in a broadcasted TV item were all positive about this approach and had the feeling that their reality was well conveyed. The most personal, original and valuable items were often produced by those neighbourhood journalists who took time to get acquainted with the residents they wanted to interview—reports of which the editor in chief of the regional newscaster claimed to be outright jealous: "We never managed to get into the trailer camp, let alone get an interesting interview out of a resident."

### *Stories of Everyday Life*

When residents were asked to express their experiences in and of the neighbourhood and their desires with respect to neighbourhood journalism, all 55 residents interviewed stressed that *You in the Neighbourhood* should adopt a factual and truthful approach. Bearing the particular burden of a problem neighbourhood news frame (experiencing a rift between televised, printed and felt reality) might explain why residents, rather than wishing for positive stories, expressed an ardent desire for *realistic* news, for knowing what really went on in their neighbourhood. "Things should not become fake," according to a 68-year-old Overvecht resident: "I feel they should show the real picture, or it will not be credible." News should not only be selected on the grounds of it being new, extraordinary or negative. According to Ahmad Moellajonov (19):

They should show not only criminal acts, but also that people are simply relaxed. Ordinary, everyday Overvecht. Not only its bad side.

Yet, they did not want neighbourhood journalists to copy or reiterate either the tone of voice or the news selection or presentation of the national or regional press. According to resident Brigitte de Koning (42), storytelling neighbourhood should be about people acting as subjects:

About how they tackle the problems. And that there is in fact mixing of cultural "minorities", how they deal with things themselves in collaboration with the police or other institutions. ... It may well be critical, of course. There may well be an item on how to deal with the hard core, but the focus should be on solutions. Instead of a fatalistic look at things ... constructive stories of people.

When the story devoted attention to crime or an alleged lack of safety, to degradation or loneliness, most residents would like to see them combined with a

solution-oriented frame, a positive and upbeat tone, the use of different perspectives (instead of the conventional “hearing both sides”) and a recognizable, concrete setting. Residents valued items that visualized everyday personal, social and geographical landmarks: central squares, public gardens, local shopkeepers, street paper sellers, garbage collectors, the local librarian and local vet. Sef Senna, a 39-year-old from Ghana, has been a neighbourhood resident for over 10 years and would like to see more “representative” images of the neighbourhood:

People think that Kanaleneiland is a neighbourhood of migrants, where you only see Moroccans, Turks and a shade of Africa. But you also see Dutch kids in the playground. This is something I would like to show as well.

Putting more “white people” into the neighbourhood picture would also help to lessen the grief of white residents who moved recently, but involuntarily, into the neighbourhood. Hanneke Denenkamp (53) claimed that she missed the “traditional Dutch cosiness” in Kanaleneiland:

When living as a Dutch person in such neighbourhood, you miss out on the Queen’s Birthday celebrations, you miss out on Liberation Day, you miss out on Christmas . . . on soccer games [of our national team] . . . In some corner you may notice a tiny orange flag. But when the Turkish national team is playing, yes, that’s when all flags are out and waving . . . For once I would also like to enjoy celebrating Queen’s Birthday with my neighbours. I would also like to see [Dutch] flags waving in my street. This is simply how it is.

When familiar and popular outdoor symbols of “Dutchness” are invisible in one’s immediate surroundings, white Dutch residents would welcome neighbourhood TV’s public acknowledgement for their loss.

### *Being Able to “Read” the Neighbourhood*

White, long-term residents in particular attributed feelings of mourning to a lack of understanding and a lack of being understood. Anneke van Heekeren (82) felt increasingly uprooted after 45 years of living in Kanaleneiland and having witnessed the transformation of the neighbourhood from a middle-class residential quarter into a multicultural, disadvantaged district: “The neighbourhood has changed so much. Sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own place.” In line with sociologist Talja Blokland (2008, p. 132), residents described how feeling out of place grows stronger when you have trouble understanding the other. In volatile neighbourhoods with many different nationalities there is an absence of social and cultural familiarity. People’s paths to belonging depend in particular on whether they were capable of “reading” the nearby other, e.g. interpreting correctly the everyday customs and habits of others in the same geographical space. When Moroccan boys, hiding their faces in hoods, are sitting on a bench, should you get afraid and try to avoid them, as mainstream media strongly suggest? Or are you able to see the boredom on their faces? Could you ask them if they want to earn some money by washing your car for you, or do you insult them by implying they have nothing better to do?

According to residents, neighbourhood TV should be instrumental in explaining everyday habits and values. This could prevent, for instance, misunderstanding of the meaning of shoes in the entrance halls of blocks of flats. While Turkish and Moroccan residents resort to this practice because in their view it is unclean to put shoes indoors,

white Dutch residents have considered this practice an infringement on the public space they share. Turkish and Moroccan residents, on the other hand, did not understand the Dutch custom of appropriating the parking space in front of one's house. By contributing to the ability of interpreting each other's everyday habits, neighbourhood TV could add to residents' intercultural communicative competences. Residents told us they would love to tell about these experiences on neighbourhood TV.

Most Dutch residents were accustomed to and valued the relative impersonal character of living in an urban environment. Some even confessed how much effort it took to appreciate particular rural customs introduced by their non-Dutch neighbours. For example, one Dutch woman who had recently lost her husband first felt uncomfortable by the care of her Turkish neighbours, until they explained to her that in a house where someone had just died you do not prepare food; for several days, others—neighbours, friends, relatives—should take care of preparing the meals. If neighbourhood TV could explain such customs, residents emphasized, it could have a constructive mediating role by creating a "comfort zone" in which residents could share their "reality".

As Blokland (2008) has argued, residents will not easily experience their environment as *uncanny* if they manage to interpret both the geographical and social-cultural expressions they observe, regardless of whether they actually know the people in that neighbourhood. Neighbourhood TV might make it easier for people to enter into contact with fellow residents, something that formerly did not happen for lack of courage or the absence of an occasion for starting a neighbourly chat. Greet Bakker (71) would like to know more about Turkish residents: "how they cook, the kind of needlework they do, where exactly they come from. But at the same time I am not assertive enough to knock on their door." Other residents who dare to take the first step became disappointed. For example, 88-year-old Arlette Muis-Schommelen, a resident for 47 years, found it hard to get in touch with "new" residents. She did not understand why they did not drop by at her place for tea, despite her invitations to do so:

There are many new foreign residents, such as Moroccans next door and Turks ... They keep to themselves and do not have much interest when I say "come over for a cup of tea if you like"; they say they will, but they never do it. So I give up.

Yet, only a few, mostly older and lonely respondents underlined a need for profound personal interaction.

### The Experience of You in the Neighbourhood

Instead of creating social intimacy as Fernback (2007) suggests, most residents valued neighbourhood TV when it paved the way for less personal occasions for conversations "over the hedge" or on the street. As Bea van Beuningen (72) commented on the clip of which she was the protagonist:

I went to where I play cards, and some seven people were there who had seen me [on neighbourhood TV]. And when I walked outside and met two Muslim women, young still ... One of them said "I saw you on TV". I say, you did? Did you enjoy it? Yes, she said she enjoyed it very much.

Also Arnout Kamerlink, mailman in Kanaleneiland, received many reactions from residents after the broadcast in which he recited a poem he had written, "also from

Moroccan youngsters from here and other youngsters and other people who said I have seen you. Quite a few even. They liked it very much.” As librarian Emilie van Heijnen (48) commented on this item:

It is of course surprising; you see him walk by and you think, hey, there goes a mailman; you don’t think any further. But when you watched the item, you somewhat get to know the man behind the mailman, isn’t it. So if you live here and you meet this man you have somewhat of an idea that you know him.

Familiarizing the unfamiliar affects residents’ feelings about their physical neighbourhood in a positive way. In line with Poletti (2011), this “life narrative” storytelling contributes to the prevalence of intimacy and affect in the construction of civic engagement. The neighbourhood becomes more their “own”. As Monique Copier (66) commented:

Yes, it is odd. For it is the world you live in that suddenly you are watching. This instantly gives you a sense of family videos, which everyone seems to like.

Normally the responsibility for the representation of reality is put one-sidedly with the journalist or the media organization. Yet, the success of neighbourhood TV appears to rest on the willingness and power of all involved—professionals, neighbourhood journalists *and* residents—to share their reality. Taking responsibility for a “readable” neighbourhood means that residents take pains to understand others and to make themselves understandable to others. Silverstone has called this ethos “media hospitality”, which he considers the obligation to hear and to listen and to create a space for effective communication, “obligations which are imposed both on the media-weak as well as the media-powerful” (2007, p. 137). For drug addict Ammar Massat (47), from the shelter for addicts in Overvecht, being responsible for making oneself understandable formed the reason to participate in neighbourhood TV:

I had the sense that people looked frowningly upon this building here. This whole idea of addicts and such. This I wanted to do away with . . . For we are people, too; we are residents of Utrecht, fully integrated. If we use drugs, it does not yet mean that I am a monster or so.

Both neighbourhoods in this study are marked by a multicultural make-up and a high percentage of vagrants, drug addicts, dealers, criminals and mallrats, which are all people about whom biased views prevail. Each personal encounter, then, may be accompanied by miscommunication or feelings of fear. Residents stated how by offering them a multiperspectival narrative context for entering into contact with each other, they no longer had to rely on cultural clichés to interpret the neighbourhood. As a result, the “readability” and consequently the predictability of everyday life increased and its specific cultural geography felt more familiar and at home. Illustrative are the many positive reactions Ammar received in the wake of the broadcast. A brother he had not talked to for years looked him up after watching the item. Ammar felt that people in the neighbourhood approached him more positively because they got to see the “real person” behind the phantom of the “drug user”.

Although residents confided their story much more easily to neighbourhood journalists, not every neighbourhood reality could be shared just as easily. Storytelling neighbourhood seems to be limited in its range of topics (residents as subjects, not

objects), news frame (constructive and solution oriented) and tone of voice (optimistic and cheerful). Residents themselves did not always feel free to discuss the seamy side of their neighbourhood, at least not on television, fearing that others would recognize them and turn against them.

Neighbourhood journalists also felt vulnerable about telling critical stories, in particular about sensitive issues and ethnic groups that are over-determined by mainstream news. Like other residents, some felt ill at ease to uncover stories of crime or violence, knowing they frequented the same supermarket and the same schoolyards as the "villains". In addition, they found it difficult to present the downside of the neighbourhoods' reality, without losing people's trust. It remained difficult to address issues about differences in a non-racist discourse. Consequently, a small number among the viewers considered the media-image presented by neighbourhood TV as too rosy. Anton (86) discussing an item about school children cleaning up front gardens: "But why they are in such a mess is not explained. Not one of them dares to say that Moroccans don't care a thing about their gardens. That's politically incorrect."

## Conclusion

In this paper we discussed why and which mainstream media practices hurt residents and to what extent participatory storytelling might be able to ease some of the pain. The impact of an overload of one-dimensional and tendentious news on two neighbourhoods illustrates how media can work as an alienating environment. Silverstone's (2007, p. 5) concept of Mediapolis made us understand how news can estrange residents from each other and their neighbourhood, but also how news stories can lower the barriers for interpersonal communication. This analysis of participatory storytelling taught us the importance of understanding mediation as a dynamic process in which professional media organizations, neighbourhood journalists and residents all bear a different responsibility for representing neighbourhood realities in productive ways.

Precisely because of its being embedded in mainstream public broadcasting, *You in the Neighbourhood* opened up opportunities for telling and listening to the stories of "ordinary people" online and on regional television far beyond both areas. Residents gave us reason to believe that the particular participatory nature of these storytelling practices was crucial in putting into perspective the dominant cultural narrative of both neighbourhoods. Within five months, the project was known by 25 per cent of the neighbourhood residents, and one year after its launch, more than 80,000 city residents watched the programmes weekly. Yet, unlike most of the community journalism scholarship (cf. Lowrey et al., 2008), the ideals of neighbourhood consensus, civic engagement or social cohesion were hardly used by residents themselves as standards for neighbourhood television. Studies of hyper-local storytelling projects, we suggest, should move beyond thinking about community as a primary good and end in itself. What residents asked from neighbourhood journalists is that their stories facilitated a comfort zone, not by copying professional mediating practices on a hyper-local level, but by directing the source of the pain: mainstream journalism's contribution to miscommunication and misinterpretation of one's surroundings and one's fellow residents, which in turn contributed to a sense of losing one's grip on neighbourhood reality. By giving the floor to everyday stories about everyday life by ordinary people living or working in the

neighbourhoods, *You in the Neighbourhood* enabled residents to interpret each other's behaviour, habits or responses more correctly. Becoming better able to understand their fellow residents made them in turn more predictable while also increasing the neighbourhood's and residents' familiarity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Tanja Dreher for extensive conversations about this subject. Special thanks also for the constructive remarks of two anonymous reviewers. Assistant researchers Jolien Arendsen, Mariska van der Sluis and Mark Merks contributed substantially to this research and I am grateful for their input. The paper profited in addition from critical remarks by Ton Brouwers, Diana Kreemers and Eva van Mossevelde. The study is part of an ongoing research project "Reinvention of Quality Journalism in the Digital Age" conducted under the auspices of CAmEra at the VU University of Amsterdam. Irene Costera Meijer is the director and principal investigator of the programme. Part of the research was subsidized by the initiators of *U in de Wijk* and the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Social Integration (WWI).

## NOTES

1. The neighbourhood television project called *U in de Wijk* (*You in the Neighbourhood*) was developed in partnership with VU University in Amsterdam and Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle. This project involved working with both its initiators and its sponsors: housing corporation Mitros, the city of Utrecht and regional public broadcaster RTV Utrecht.
2. For an extensive description of the quantitative and qualitative content analysis, see the appendix of the research report: [http://www.windesheim.nl/~media/Files/Windesheim/Research%20Publications/111006\\_Een\\_leesbare\\_wijk\\_De\\_impact\\_van\\_wijktelevisie\\_32.pdf](http://www.windesheim.nl/~media/Files/Windesheim/Research%20Publications/111006_Een_leesbare_wijk_De_impact_van_wijktelevisie_32.pdf).

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